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ABSTRACT

A middle school classroom teacher and a college instructor describe an activity in which 14 students in a sixth-grade special education class corresponded with college students enrolled in a language arts methods course. The middle school students were excited about writing and motivated to do their best, and their writing grew in complexity, accuracy, and length as the bi-weekly correspondence continued. The college students saw both the problems and the growth in their partners' writing skills and had the opportunity to implement some of the teaching techniques they studied in the classroom. (RS)

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PAIRED WRITING: MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS FIND AN AUDIENCE IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article is a description of a project to motivate middle school students in a multi-categorical special education class to write. These students were paired with prospective teachers enrolled in "Language Arts in the Elementary School," a methods course for undergraduate students in the teacher-education program at Mt. Mercy College, Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

The paper describes the project, the assignments, and the outcomes. It also details possible changes in the program as it is utilized in the coming year. Overall, the project proved beneficial to the special education students and to the prospective teachers.

PAIRED WRITING: MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS FIND AN AUDIENCE IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

To find meaning in writing all writers need an audience (Hansen, 1987). Middle school students are no exception. This article examines middle-school students in a multi-categorical special education class. The authors explore one way to motivate reluctant students.

The class consisted of 14 sixth grade students with a learning, behavior, or mental disability. Nine students were classified as resource students and received one to two hours of assistance in language arts. Five students were classified as self-contained with integration (SCI). All 14 students were staffed for written language and were being seen as a group for writing. Their writing ability varied a great deal depending on the severity of their disability. Some students could write lengthy, sequential paragraphs with adequate detail and description. Other students struggled to spell the simplest words and/or create the simplest sentences. Many of them were not highly motivated to write. It was important that they be given a reason for writing. Their instructor needed to find some way to let them see the joy of sharing their ideas with others. Atwell (1987) states that all writers need time, ownership and response. The teacher felt that she needed to find others who would respond to these students in a positive way.

A student from an area college had worked with students in this multi-categorical class as part of a field experience for "Teaching Reading in the Elementary School." Several of the middle school students enjoyed the one-on-one relationship this offered. It appeared to be a good way to motivate reluctant readers. Possibly something could be arranged that would help the reluctant writers.

Following a discussion by the college instructor and the middle school classroom teacher, it was decided that correspondence between college students and middle school students could be mutually beneficial. Arrangements were made to pair students enrolled in "Language Arts in the Elementary School" with middle school adolescents. In the first exchange the middle school students wrote and revised their stories using computers. The college participants were asked to read the stories and respond to content, not mechanics. In their Language Arts Methods course, the college students had been reading articles about and discussing the importance of responding to content and of valuing the writer's ideas. This was a chance to put the concept into practice. They had also read Atwell's book, In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents. Their readings and the instructor stressed the vulnerability of adolescents. Adolesence is a special time and it is important when reading their writing to show that they are valued as individuals. The college students read their first papers from the adolescents and they related similar experiences and commented on things that they liked about the stories.

It was decided to continue exchanging writings every other week throughout the semester. The second assignment was more specific. Students from the middle school were asked to write about themselves. Many provided detailed descriptions of their families and talked about what they liked to do. The college students responded by describing their family situations and interests. This had a side benefit for both teachers. It enabled them to find out more about their students as they shared the correspondence. All of the students in both groups seemed interested in this exchange of background information. The authors think this would make an excellent first assignment.

In other projects the middle school students wrote on various topics and the college students continued to respond to content. The college students wrote about the parts that they enjoyed and at times offered suggestions to the writers. They viewed the middle school students as writers and indicated respect for their work.

The last assignment was to write an advertisement to sell a product. This was done, as were earlier assignments, on the computer. The teachers arranged to have both classes meet in the computer lab at the middle school. Each student had his/her own disk and computer. The college students who had not previously met their conterpart, readily paired up with the young adolescents. It was fun to hear them comment. "You mean you have to write at college?" "This is your teacher?" "You get grades too?" "I really enjoyed your letters."

Once at the computers, the adolescents were eager to share their ad with their friends. The college students were impressed with both their computer skills and their growth in writing ability. The adolescents were enthusiastic about their product and eager to see what their friend thought about their ad. They did a good selling job on everything from cars to cookies and ice cream. They were descriptive and interesting ads, and they were proud to share their ideas.

The authors have decided that this interpersonal contact is beneficial for all concerned. Students at both schools see the importance of individual exchange. The middle school students have seen a format in which writing can be fun and there is a purpose involved. It is still very difficult for many of these individuals to write. It remains a slow process, but motivation is a little easier.

This has been a worthwhile project. After one semester there are changes that will be made. The authors plan to let the two groups meet at the beginning of the semester. Hopefully, the students from the middle school will be able to come to the college to see their "exchange partner." Possibly the classes can get together at other times during the year as well. Anecdotal records will be kept to document changes and growth. Assignments need to be evaluated to maximize the benefit of feedback the college students are able to provide.

The major benefit to the middle school students was the added purpose to write. They wrote to communicate information to another person. This added a motivation and excitement to writing. They enjoyed the one-on-one attention and looked forward to getting their stories back. Extreme excitement surrounded the classroom when their partners visited. Motivated students make much greater gains in their writing (Calkins, 1986). As the semester progressed the middle school teacher watched the writing grow in complexity, accuracy and length because they cared about their final product.

Clearly, there was substantial benefit to the methods' class students as well. All of the students in the class are given the opportunity to respond to one individual for the entire semester. They can see both the problems and the growth in writing skills. The project also provided the college students with an awareness of learning disabilities and gave them opportunities to discuss their observations with their peers and the instructor. Graves (1983) responds to questions that teachers ask about writing and the writing process. He discusses how to work with students at different draft stages. All of these topics are dealt with in class but this experience gives them a "hands-on"

approach. Students can see how some of the pieces fit together. Obviously this is not a "busy work" project. It is a real experience where they can implement some of the techniques that they have studied in a meaningful situation that benefits others.

One community of writers is sharing with another community. Hansen (1987, p. 59) discusses the importance of a diverse community of writers who know that they have many resources available to them. Resources also include other people. Middle school students see that adults also write and value writing. They can also learn to use other people to give them necessary feedback to improve their writing. They can learn to take risks and be creative. This is what community and sharing is all about. It is a growing experience where students are free to "take risks" in a caring environment. We definitely consider this a growing experience for all involved.

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